

Alain Badiou. *In Praise of Theatre: Alain Badiou with Nicolas Truong.* Translated by Andrew Bielski. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2015. Pp 107. ISBN: 978-0-7456-8696-7.

According to Martin Puchner, “among the living philosophers, no one stands more clearly at the intersection of theatre and philosophy than Alain Badiou, whose significance for the study of theatre cannot be overestimated.”¹ Nonetheless, although theatre specialists are slowly discovering Badiou’s writings on the theatre and despite him being an internationally acclaimed philosopher and media-savvy intellectual, his non-French speaking readers have been unaware of his love of the theatre, both as an avid spectator and as an occasional playwright.

Plato in his *Republic* (II, III, X) did not hold poets (of any “denomination”) in high respect; instead he considered them “myth makers,” who badmouth humans and gods alike and “maim the thought of those who hear them.” Be that as it may, Badiou, a meticulous reader of Plato, who has even written a play about him (envisioning a full-fledged film entitled *The Life of Plato*), is active both in philosophy and playwriting; to put it in his words: “I accepted to be divided between the classical form of philosophy, which is to say great systematic treatises, and the occasional incursion, a kind of joyful foray, into the domain of theatre” (7).

The translations of some of Badiou’s plays in English published by Columbia University Press (*The Incident at Antioch*, 2013 and *Ahmed the Philosopher*, 2014) precede the translation of *L’éloge du théâtre/In Praise of Theatre* by Andrew Bielski, with a very useful introduction and notes for the non-theatre specialist, published in 2015. This elegant volume is the transcription of a public dialogue between Badiou and Nicolas Truong (a well-known culture journalist of *Le Monde*) held on July 2012 at the Avignon Festival, as part of the Theatre of Ideas discussion series; thus, the format of the book seems to follow the traditional genre of the philosophical dialogue. The content is divided in five parts, which offer an overview to Badiou’s relationship to the theatre, both as a philosopher and a theatre-lover. Apparently, his fascination with the stage started at age of 14 in Toulouse, when he saw his first performance ever, *Scapin the Schemer* (*Les fourberies de Scapin*) by Molière, which was also the first part he ever played in 1952 (and the model for Badiou’s play *Ahmed the Subtle*). It is clear that the young Alain was enthusiastic right from the start, because he eventually went on to read the complete works of any playwright he could lay his hands on, from Aristophanes to Chekhov and from Shakespeare to Strindberg. What might come as a surprise is Badiou’s predilection for comedy, agreeing with Hegel who “designates comedy as the superior form of the theatre” (11).

In “Theatre and Philosophy: Story of an Old Couple,” Badiou elaborates on the competitive nature of the relationship between theatre and philosophy stating clearly that “it’s because of its effectiveness that the theatre warrants being kept under surveillance and

¹ Martin Puchner, “The Theatre of Alain Badiou,” *Theatre Research International* (2009), vol. 34. no 3, p. 258.

often condemned” (25) and praising it for being “the greatest machine ever invented for absorbing contradictions” (31). The conversation revolves around issues like the ambiguous relationship of Plato and Nietzsche to the theater (who have recourse to its qualities, albeit being suspicious of it), the mockery of philosophers by playwrights (i.e. Aristophanes, Marivaux), whether philosophy can be the basis of good theatre, and it even includes some playful advice to fellow philosophers from Badiou “prefer writing your own theatre to denouncing that of others” (31).

In the following parts, the discussion continues, in the rather expansive manner distinctive of French elocution, on the theatre being situated between “the immanence that dance exalts and the transcendence that the image presents” (52) and the cinema being defined as “a melancholic art because it is an art of the trace of the idea and not of its corporeal presentation” (59). One of the most interesting questions that Truong asks is “In what sense is the theatre still a means of orienting ourselves in the confusion of the times?” (63) to which Badiou responds that it is a fundamental responsibility of theatre to show “the confusion as *confusion*” (64), because by doing that it reveals to us “previously unseen” possibilities. He, then, disapproves of the notion of “political theatre,” because the “theatre belongs under the heading [...] of an artistic truth procedure, distinct, in its very essence from a political procedure” (74) and he repeats a very pleasing suggestion (especially to dedicated theatre-goers) that “those who went to the theatre adequately often would pay less taxes” (76-77), an idea that was first conveyed in Badiou’s *Rhapsody for the Theatre* (2009).

It is clear throughout the conversation that by “theatre” Badiou means above all a theatrical text, and/or performances closely based on texts written to be performed; be it Molière, Ibsen, Strindberg, Brecht, or Koltès, there has to be a text in which all these life-changing ideas and previously unseen possibilities are figuring.

All in all, *In Praise of Theatre* proves that Badiou’s relationship to the theatre has much more to do with the concept of theatre as a tool for the propagation of philosophical ideas than with theatre as it can be viewed on the contemporary “postdramatic” stage, as Hans-Thies Lehmann has called it. Plato’s and Badiou’s primary focus is philosophy and because they both aspire to being understood, they do not hesitate to employ the dramatic/dialogic structure, as the most accessible form for educational and entertainment purposes alike. A philosopher’s praise to theatre is always welcome, especially when expressed in Badiou’s candid and passionate manner.

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